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Design Discourse: A Way Forward for Theistic Evolutionism?

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Summary: It is usually supposed that biological design arguments (where biological complex order is seen as evidence of a Creator) are made obsolete by Darwinian evolutionary theory. However, philosopher Alvin Plantinga and others have defended the continued possibility of a rational “design discourse”, in which biological order is taken as a sign of God’s purposeful action. In this article, I consider two objections to design discourse: (1) a theological objection to biological design based on the problem of natural evil, and (2) the evolutionary objection, according to which evolutionary theory removes the justification for any biological design perception. Whereas Plantinga’s own response utilizes the arguments of the Intelligent Design movement, I argue in favor of utilizing “design discourse” as part of a theistic evolutionist view.

Keywords: theistic evolutionism, teleology, design argument, problem of natural evil, Alvin Plantinga

Zusammenfassung: Es wird gemeinhin angenommen, dass biologische Design Argumente (welche die komplexe biologische Ordnung als Beweis für einen Schöpfer erachten) durch Darwins Evolutionstheorie obsolet werden. Der Philosoph Alvin Plantinga und andere haben jedoch die Möglichkeit eines fortgeführten rationalen „Design Diskurses“ verteidigt, der die biologische Ordnung als ein Zeichen Gottes zielgerichteter Handlung begreift. In diesem Artikel betrachte ich zwei Einwände gegen den Design Diskurs: (1) einen theologischen Einwand zum biologischen Design basierend auf dem Problem der natürlichen Übel und (2) den evolutionären Einwand, nach dem die Evolutionstheorie die Berechtigung jeder biologischen Design Vorstellung aufhebt. Während Plantingas eigene Antwort die Argumente der intelligenten Design Bewegung anwendet, argumentiere ich für die Anwendung des „Design Diskurses“ als Element einer theistischen evolutionären Sicht.

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Schlüsselwörter: theistischer Evolutionismus, Teleologie, Design Argument, Problem des natürlichen Übels, Alvin Plantinga

I Plantinga's Understanding of "Design Discourse"

It is usually supposed that biological design arguments (where biological complex order is seen as evidence of a Creator) are made obsolete by Darwinian evolutionary theory. This appears to have been Darwin's view as well. In a famous passage in his autobiography, Darwin wrote that "the old argument of design in nature, as given by Paley, which formerly seemed to me so conclusive, falls, now that the law of natural selection has been discovered. We can no longer argue that, for instance, the beautiful hinge of a bivalve shell must have been made by an intelligent being, like the hinge of a door by a man."¹ Evolution is not usually taken to imply that theism and evolutionary theory are logically incompatible. Rather, it simply taken to mean that we can no longer rationally arrive at theism, or derive evidential support for theism, by considering the complex, apparently purposeful order of biological organisms. The same understanding is repeated by both theistic and atheistic interpreters of evolution.²

In his book "Where the Conflict Really Lies: Science, Religion and Naturalism", philosopher Alvin Plantinga defends the idea that the purposeful designedness of biological organisms might give grounds for belief in God even in our contemporary situation. However, instead of a design argument, Plantinga defends what he calls a "design discourse".³ Plantinga argues that we do not need to be able to demonstrate that biology has a designer through arguments in order to hold that their order does reveal the wisdom of the Creator. Rather, Plantinga argues that belief in a Creator simply arises in us as something like a perceptual belief. To defend the reliability of this belief, it is sufficient to simply refute

¹ Charles DARWIN, *The Autobiography of Charles Darwin*. Ed. Nora Barlow. London: Collins, 1958.

² See e.g. Michael RUSE, 2003. *Darwin and Design: Does Evolution Have a Purpose?* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. Contemporary natural theologians like Richard SWINBURNE (*The Existence of God*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) thus do not give biology a central place in their defences of the rationality of theistic belief. To the extent that their arguments rely on the natural science, the sciences in question are cosmology and physics.

³ Alvin PLANTINGA, *Where the Conflict Really Lies: Science, Religion and Naturalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. Chapter 8.

objections to this belief, not to produce an argument. Plantinga's goal is to demonstrate that Christians are rational in believing that they perceive divine purpose in biology. This is an interesting argument that promises to redeem Paley's argument of the biological world as a temple which reflects the glory of God for all to see, but can all objections be answered?

Plantinga's argument follows in the footsteps of 19th-century philosopher Thomas Reid (1710–96), who argued that belief in design is based on a non-inferential capacity to detect design that all humans have and that is required to detect even the intelligence of other humans. Just as we perceive that other humans have minds, and that human artifacts are purposefully created, so too we also perceive that there is a Creator of nature. According to Reid, design arguments can act to reinforce the reliability of this initial perception, but such arguments are not necessary for belief.⁴ In the recent discussion, Reid's general line of the argument has been followed not only by Plantinga, but also by Del Ratzsch, Mats Wahlberg and John T. Mullen.⁵ All have claimed in different ways that belief in the designedness of biology may be rationally based simply on the human perception of biology as designed. This belief can be rationally analysed and perhaps even developed into a formal argument, but such arguments are, according to Plantinga, usually not the original source of the belief. This basic contention is plausible: as Plantinga notes, both defenders and critics of design arguments have noted that they can feel the intuitive force of design as an explanation.⁶

In my view, Plantinga's design discourse is interesting, since (if successful) it appears to satisfy two desiderata that are important for any Christian natural theology.⁷ First, it is desirable to "save the phenomena" of ordinary religious

⁴ Thomas REID, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man* (1785), essay V. Ed. Derek R. Brookes. University Park, PA: Penn State Press, 2002

⁵ Del RATZSCH, *Nature, Design and Science: The Status of Design in Natural Science*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2001; Mats Wahlberg, *Reshaping Natural Theology: Seeing Nature as Creation*. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); John Tholfsen Mullen, *Design Arguments within a Reidian Epistemology*. Unpublished dissertation. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 2004.

⁶ PLANTINGA, *Where the Conflict Really Lies*, pp. 244–248. For further documentation, see also C. Stephen EVANS, *Natural Signs and Knowledge of God: A New Look at Theistic Arguments*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010, chapter 4.

⁷ For a review of different contemporary natural theologies, see Rope KOJONEN, "Natural Theology in Evolution: A Review of Critiques and Changes." *The European Journal for Philosophy of Religion*. Vol. 9. No. 2, pp. 83–117. 2017. For discussion of the Barthian theological objection to natural theology, see Burkhard NONNENMACHER, "Natürliche Theologie und Offenbarung." *Neue Zeitschrift für Theologie und Religionsphilosophie*, Vol. 9. No. 3. 2017, pp. 311–330; and

belief, and the idea that one could be rational in believing in God even if one is not able to personally present a fully developed natural theology. This is important from the point of view of a responsible theological epistemology, since we want to defend the possibility that knowledge of God is not only available to the learned and the wise.⁸ Plantinga's "design discourse" aims to show how the ordinary person's intuitive, perceptual belief in the designedness of nature could provide reasonable (if only partial) grounds for religious faith. While other design arguments (such as the fine-tuning design argument) may be defensible even if this basic design experience is rejected, these are based on advanced physics and are more difficult to follow for many laypersons.

Second, it is desirable to avoid the danger of isolating the Christian faith in its own cultural ghetto, with no common ground or point of contact with the surrounding reality, and no way to criticize or support the rationality of belief by appeal to evidence. This would leave aside the biblical (if often contested) doctrine that God is the Creator of the entire cosmos, and that it has the God-given capacity to reflect his glory. While we may not want to say that we can "prove" the existence of God, it still seems desirable to say that the Christian faith can make sense of reality in a way that provides some intellectual support for it.⁹ Plantinga's design discourse satisfies this desideratum by aiming to show how a common human experience supports belief in God as Creator. Plantinga does not rule out the possibility that there could be other evidence in favor of belief as well, but his design discourse appears to be at least a step in this direction.

Plantinga's defense of a design discourse as providing some internal justification for faith is an important development in his own thought. The basis of design discourse for Plantinga is the perception of design, which can have even "overwhelming" internal force.¹⁰ Plantinga is known for his defense of an externalist epistemology, in which the warrant enjoyed by a belief is based on the proper

Andrew MOORE, "Theological Critiques of Natural Theology." In J. H. Brooke, F. Watts & R. R. Manning (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Natural Theology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, pp. 227–244. For two different contemporary defenses of natural theology against Barthian and other objections, see Alister MCGRATH, *Re-Imagining Nature: The Promise of a Christian Natural Theology*. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016, and Richard SWINBURNE, *Faith and Reason*. 2nd Edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.

⁸ Plantinga is one of the most well-known critics of such positions. See PLANTINGA, *Warranted Christian Belief*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.

⁹ For a good discussion of the relation between evidence and faith, see Olli-Pekka VAINIO, *Beyond Fideism: Negotiable Religious Identities*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010. On the theme of the accessibility, yet resistibility of divine natural revelation, see EVANS, *Natural Signs and Knowledge of God*.

¹⁰ PLANTINGA, *Where the Conflict Really Lies*, p. 246.

functioning of our cognitive faculties. Plantinga argues that we do not need to be able to verify that our faculties are properly functioning in order for our beliefs to be warranted. In his *Warranted Christian Belief*, Plantinga aims to show how Christian belief is warranted if God exists, as a basic belief not requiring the support of natural theological arguments.¹¹ In contrast to *externalists* like Plantinga, *internalists* like Richard Swinburne argue that the rational justification of beliefs concerns factors that are internally accessible to the person forming that belief.¹² Plantinga has resisted this critique, but his remarks about “design discourse” imply that he at least acknowledges the value of feeling the force of some reason for belief, even if one cannot put it into words as an argument. This is part of a general trend where Plantinga has gradually become more friendly towards the prospects of natural theology.¹³

In this article, I analyse two objections to Plantinga’s approach. The first objection is based on the problem of natural evil, and concerns the theological value of the biological design discourse. For example, evolutionary biologist Francisco J. Ayala argues that viewing organisms as designed by the Creator actually comes close to blasphemy, since this would make the Creator also responsible for the poorly designed features of biological organisms which lead to suffering. According to Ayala, “Darwin’s gift to religion” is to show how the order of biology can be explained without the Creator’s intervention.¹⁴ Ayala means to apply this argument particularly against the Intelligent Design movement’s arguments (which are different from Plantinga), and does not address it against Plantinga directly. However, it seems the question is also pertinent here, since Plantinga also aims to ascribe responsibility for biological design to God. The problem of bad design is undoubtedly a major reason why many Christian

11 PLANTINGA, *Warranted Christian Belief*.

12 See e.g. SWINBURNE, *Faith and Reason*, pp. 57–63. For example, it is argued that an epistemology like Plantinga’s could also be used to defend any kind of religious beliefs, even highly dubious ones, thus compromising religion as a quest for truth. Plantinga coined the term “the Great Pumpkin objection” to refer to this class of objections in his paper “The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology”, *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Catholic Philosophical Association*, Vol. 54, No. 49, pp. 49–62. The objection has since been advanced by Michael Martin and others. See MARTIN, *Atheism: A Philosophical Justification*, Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1990, pp. 272–276. I am indebted to Ilmari HIRVONEN, “Grandson of the Great Pumpkin: The Problem of Arbitrariness in Alvin Plantinga’s Apologetic Programme”, a paper presented at the Helsinki Analytic Theology Workshop, 2018.

13 For documentation of this development, see Keith MASCORD, *Alvin Plantinga and Christian Apologetics*. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2007, chapter 6.

14 Francisco AYALA, *Darwin’s Gift to Science and Religion*. Washington, DC: Joseph Henry Press, 2007.

believers are also reluctant to use design language about biology in the way Plantinga does.¹⁵

The second objection is based on understanding evolution as a scientific explanation for the biological designs we observe. The critic may admit here that we do indeed have *prima facie* grounds for assuming that biology is designed. In fact, this is usually admitted by atheistic interpreters of evolutionary theory, such as Richard Dawkins, who writes that “*biology is the study of complicated things that give the appearance of having been designed for a purpose.*”¹⁶ But – they go on to argue – now we have another explanation for such features of biology, namely evolution by natural selection and random mutations. Evolution is a “blind watchmaker” that can produce design without a designer, and thus it undercuts the rationality of our intuitive design discourse.

I have selected to analyse these objections because I believe they are linked. However, there are also many other objections which I do not deal with here. Even my treatment of the objections based on bad design and evolutionary theory deal with only some of such objections, as I will point out in each section.¹⁷

15 Another reason could be simply that they prefer traditional terms like teleology. For example, Michael Hanby has recently argued in different ways that Paley and Darwin have bequeathed us a wholly inadequate concept of teleology, and that we need to return to a more robust account of it. For someone cognizant of these trends, the word “design” might be understood to ally too closely with Paley, rather than someone like Thomas Aquinas. However, it seems to me that Plantinga uses the term design in a very general sense not incompatible with Thomish; he simply means purposeful creation and ordering. See Michael HANBY, *No God, No Science? Theology, Cosmology and Biology*. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013. See also Simon OLIVER, *Creation: A Guide for the Perplexed*. London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2017, chapter 4.

16 Richard DAWKINS, *The Blind Watchmaker: How Biology Reveals a Universe Without Design*. New York, NY: Penguin, 1991, 1.

17 Many further theological critiques of using the terminology of design could also be made. For instance, it might be argued that using the word “design” makes for a too anthropomorphic conception of the Creator. It brings to mind God as a great engineer, rather than God as the ground of being, who is able to support us in existence. However, it seems to me there is no special difficulty in using the word “designer” of God, in comparison with other words like “wise” or “loving”, which must also be used in an analogous manner. The doctrine of creation does also traditionally refer to God as the one who has ordered the cosmos – indeed, some exegetes even argue that this is the only meaning of “creation” explicitly found in the Bible. Here talk of design as purposeful ordering can find a biblical basis. However, I agree with those theologians who defend the doctrine of creation out of nothing as also biblical and important. For recent explorations of the doctrine, see particularly David B. BURRELL (ed.) *Creation and the God of Abraham*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010; and Matthew LEVERING, *Engaging the Doctrine of Creation: Cosmos, Creatures and the Wise and Good Creator*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2017.

II Natural Evil as an Objection to Design

The problem of natural evil is closely related to the problem of natural evil, which is one of the core objections against any belief in God. The traditional objection against design arguments was eloquently stated by Hume in his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*:

Look round this universe. What an immense profusion of beings, animated and organized, sensible and active! You admire this prodigious variety and fecundity. But inspect a little more narrowly these living existences, the only beings worth regarding. How hostile and destructive to each other! How insufficient all of them for their own happiness! How contemptible or odious to the spectator! The whole presents nothing but the idea of a blind nature, impregnated by a great vivifying principle, and pouring forth from her lap, without discernment or parental care, her maimed and abortive children.¹⁸

Hume goes on to argue that while the existence of natural evil might be logically compatible with the existence of God (a point now generally conceded after Plantinga's work on the topic)¹⁹, it at least provides a great amount of counter-evidence to the idea that God is good and wise.

However, here I will focus on the problem of natural evil as an argument against theological talk of biological design. This objection has been used often particularly in the debate over Intelligent Design. Several prominent writers have argued that the problem of natural evil makes affirming biology as designed by

18 HUME, *Dialogues and Natural History of Religion*. Ed. John Gaskin. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 113.

19 See PLANTINGA, *God, Freedom, and Evil*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1977. For discussion on the impact of the argument, see Graham OPPY, *Arguing About Gods*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006, pp. 262–263. For further discussion of the problem see Michael MURRAY, *Nature Red in Tooth and Claw: Theism and the Problem of Animal Suffering*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011, as well as Christopher SOUTHGATE, *The Groaning of Creation: God, Evolution, and the Problem of Evil*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008. For an interesting debate, see Paul DRAPER & Trent DOUGHERTY, “Explanation and the Problem of Evil.” *The Blackwell Companion to the Problem of Evil*. Ed. McBrayer, Justin P. & Howard-Snyder, Daniel. Oxford: Blackwell, 2014. Pp. 71–87. Elsewhere, Dougherty argues that the distinction between the logical and evidential problem collapses in light of how deductive arguments actually work. Deductive arguments also do not assume that we have full certainty of their premises before they can lend some credibility to the conclusion. Rather, to the degree that we have confidence in the premises, we should also have confidence in the conclusion. DOUGHERTY, *The Problem of Animal Pain*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, chapter 2.

God theologically dangerous.²⁰ The most extensive development of this objection can be credited to biologist Francisco Ayala, to whom I now turn.

Explaining how biology, and indeed all of nature is suboptimally designed, Ayala argues that “the natural world abounds in catastrophes, disasters, imperfections, dysfunctions, suffering, and cruelty”²¹ and shudders “in terror at the thought that some people of faith would implicitly attribute the calamity to the Creator’s faulty design.”²² For Ayala, “attributing these to specific agency by the Creator amounts to blasphemy”.²³ For Ayala, “Darwin’s gift” to religion is the possibility to absolve God of the responsibility for any such natural evils, since Darwin showed how the development of biological forms can happen without God’s involvement, by a free process that God has started but does not control.

The basic idea of Ayala’s evolutionary theodicy being advanced is explained succinctly by Michael Ruse:

But supposing that God did (and had to) create through law, then Richard Dawkins of all people offers a piece of candy to the Christian. Dawkins argues that the only physical way to get organic adaptation – the design-like nature of living beings – is through natural selection, that very painful mechanism that worried Darwin! Other mechanisms are either false (such as Lamarckism, the inheritance of acquired characteristics) or inadequate (such as saltationism, change by sudden jumps). In other words, although Darwinism does not speak to all cases of physical evil – the earthquakes – it does speak to the physical evil that it itself is supposed to bring on. It is Darwinism with suffering, or nothing.²⁴

The argument is that if God wanted to create through an evolutionary process, then he had to create through the Darwinian process, giving the process freedom

20 In addition to Ayala and Ruse, see e.g. the BioLogos writers, scientists Karl Giberson and Darrel Falk. GIBERSON, “Evolution and the Problem of Evil.” *Beliefnet: Science and the Sacred*. Available at <<http://blog.beliefnet.com/scienceandthesacred/2009/09/evolution-and-the-problem-of-evil.html>>. Accessed on March 29, 2018. And FALK, “On Reducing Irreducible Complexity, part II.” *BioLogos website*. Available at <<https://biologos.org/blogs/archive/reducing-irreducible-complexity-part-2>>. Accessed on March 29, 2018.

21 AYALA, *Darwin’s Gift to Science and Religion*, x.

22 AYALA, *Darwin’s Gift to Science and Religion*, xi. One problem not discussed here is that the suboptimality of biological design is sometimes hard to evaluate, and depends on what is thought to be optimal and the end goal of biology. This has been much discussed by proponents of ID as a possible response to the problem of bad design. However, to me this is in itself an insufficient response. See Erkki Vesa Rope KOJONEN, *The Intelligent Design Debate and the Temptation of Scientism*. London: Routledge, 2016, chapter 9.

23 AYALA, *Darwin’s Gift to Science and Religion*, p. 160.

24 Michael RUSE, “Darwinism and the Problem of Evil.” *The Huffington Post*. March 11, 2011. Available at <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/michael-ruse/darwinism-and-the-problem_b_835094.html>. Accessed on January 24, 2014.

to evolve in whatever direction. Creating in such a hands-off manner, God is no longer to be blamed for the suffering that this evolutionary process creates. Furthermore, the idea is that those who attempt to ascribe the responsibility for biology to God cannot at the same time adopt this theodicy, and thereby respond to the problem of natural evil. To apply this against Plantinga: if we are to give glory to God for the beautiful biological designs of organisms, as his design discourse implies, then surely we must also attribute God the blame for all the bad design. But this would lead to compromising God's goodness.

This challenge has many levels, and many different responses could be given. This argument says that the theist who wants to say the Creator is responsible for biological forms will lose something good (the evolutionary theodicy), leaving this theist with a serious problem (the problem of natural evil). Accordingly, it can be responded to either by stating that the evolutionary theodicy is not actually good, and that there are ways of responding to the problem also within Plantinga's design discourse. I will focus here on the first.

First, the viability of this particular evolutionary theodicy is theologically dubious. Based on the traditional understanding of God, it is not clear that God "had to" create through a lawlike process. As Robert J. Russell points out, this seems to bypass God's omnipotence, and ability to create any sort of laws of nature he chooses: "Why then did God choose to create this universe with these laws and constants knowing that they would as a consequence make the full sweep of natural evil inevitable? In effect, the Ruse/Dawkins argument does not rescue God from blame, but merely places blame at a foundational level, leading to the Leibnizian challenge: is this the best of all possible universes?"²⁵ The necessity of a lawlike evolutionary process would fit better with process theism or other views in which the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* is abandoned.

Second, the viability of this theodicy also poses some scientific questions. Ayala's theodicy depends on his understanding of evolution as a highly contingent process that does not have any direction built into it. Thus this theodicy will only be credible if we buy into this account. But several biologists, notably have made the case that evolution actually follows a predetermined direction at least to some degree. In contrast to the view of Stephen Jay Gould and Ayala, they present an almost Platonic understanding of evolution, in which evolution produces forms whose possibilities are already built into nature at the start.²⁶ Argu-

²⁵ Robert J. RUSSELL, "Recent Theological Interpretations of Evolution." *Theology and Science*. Vol. 11. No. 3. 169–184. 2013. P. 179.

²⁶ See e.g. Simon CONWAY MORRIS, *Life's Solution: Inevitable Humans in a Lonely Universe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2005, and "The Predictability of Evolution: Glimpses into a Post-Darwinian World." *Naturwissenschaften*. Vol. 96, 2009, pp. 1313–1337, and Andreas

ments for fine-tuning also seem to show that the possibility of evolution is dependent on a vast amount of fairly tight preconditions being fulfilled.²⁷ The extent of contingency in the evolutionary process depends on future findings of science, but the general point of the dependence of evolution on such preconditions does not. As Christian de Duve pointed out already in 1984, evolutionary “chance did not operate in a vacuum. It operated in a universe governed by orderly laws and made of matter endowed with specific properties. These laws and properties are the constraints that shape the evolutionary roulette and restrict the numbers that it can turn up.”²⁸

Accordingly, what evolution can produce is constrained by these preconditions, which are (in the theological understanding) created by God. If so, then God controls what evolution can and cannot produce, and the evolutionary theodicy seems unable to show that God is not responsible for biology.

There may be a more promising way to construct the evolutionary theodicy as well, in a way that makes it compatible with creation ex nihilo. Namely: perhaps God has some good reason for choosing to use an evolutionary process in creation. Perhaps an evolutionary process has a beauty to it that demonstrates the Creator’s ability better than the alternative of special creation, even though this process produces suboptimal results and includes the possibility of suffering. As Charles Kingsley famously wrote: “we knew of old that God was so wise that he could make all things: but behold, He is so much wiser than that, that he can make all things make themselves.”²⁹ And as noted, there are also many other responses to the problem of natural evil, few of which require giving up divine

WAGNER, *Arrival of the Fittest: How Nature Innovates*. New York, NY: Penguin, 2014. For the contrary perspective, see Gould’s classic statement in Stephen Jay GOULD, *Wonderful Life: The Burgess Shale and the Nature of History*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1989. For debate, see C. H. LINEWEAVER, P. DAVIES, & M. RUSE (ed.), *Complexity and the Arrow of Time*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013.

27 See Geraint F. LEWIS & Luke BARNES, *A Fortunate Universe: Life in a Finely Tuned Cosmos*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016. For a defense of a fine-tuning design argument, see Robin COLLINS, “The Teleological Argument.” In *The Blackwell Companion to Natural Theology*. Eds. William Lane Craig & J. P. Moreland. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012. For debate, see Neil A. MANSON (ed.), *God and Design. The Teleological Argument and Modern Science*. London: Routledge, 2003.

28 Christian DE DUVE, *A Guided Tour of the Living Cell*. New York: Scientific American. 1984. I owe the quote to Karl GIBERSON and Mariano ARTIGAS from their book *Oracles of Science: Celebrity Scientists versus God and Religion*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006, 32–33.

29 Charles KINGSLEY, *The Natural Theology of the Future*, xxvii. London: Macmillan, 1874. Mats Wahlberg comments on this: “If it takes more wisdom to create through an evolutionary process than by hands-on-design, and if structures created by hand-on-design by humans are expressive of human intent and intelligence, why could not structures created by God in that more wisdom-

responsibility for biology, or assuming that God could not have created otherwise. Demonstrating that Plantinga's design discourse fails because of the theological problem of natural evil would require showing that none of these theodicies are viable; otherwise the Darwinian theodicy cannot be asserted as the only option.³⁰

Nothing in this response absolves God of responsibility, however. Rather, it is argued that God has a good reason for acting as he does, and to adopt an evolutionary process leading to imperfect designs. As long as God's responsibility for biology is not abrogated, such an evolutionary theodicy seems compatible with Plantinga's design discourse.

III The Evolutionary Objection

To my mind, the more serious objection to Plantinga's design discourse comes from evolutionary biology. Here it is important to note, following Wahlberg, that there are two different senses in which evolution could be a defeater for design beliefs.³¹ First (1), it could be argued that there is a contradiction between evolution and design, such that both cannot be true at the same time. Against such

demanding way reflect divine intent and intelligence?" WAHLBERG, *Reshaping Natural Theology*, 182.

30 Christopher SOUTHGATE (*The Groaning of Creation*, pp. 387–388) also argues that evolution as we know it “*was indeed the only way, or the best way, God could give rise to creaturely selves.*” However, Southgate formulates his argument without assuming process theism, or without denying *creatio ex nihilo* (see pp. 22–25).

I find three main ways of defending the value of the evolutionary process in the literature. First, it has been argued that it is good for the universe to exhibit progress, as seen in evolution. Second, it has been argued that any universe possessing autonomy must be evolutionary. Third, it has been argued that it is good for God to keep his action in creating life hidden so as to support our religious freedom. In my view, these reasons are not very convincing. For example, the idea of a free evolutionary process as a requirement for the autonomy of creation seems strange. Why should evolution as a process guarantee the freedom and autonomy of its products in a better way than some alternative (e.g. special creation)? It seems that the autonomy of creatures depends on what kind of properties they have (such as consciousness and the capacity for reciprocal love), rather than what kind of process produced these properties. Furthermore, if we do not adopt panpsychism, then creation is not conscious, and it does not seem fitting to talk of the value of creation's freedom in the same way as it does for conscious creatures. For some critique of evolutionary theodicies along similar lines, see Murray, *Nature Red in Tooth and Claw*, chapter 6. Murray also presents many other possible responses to the problem of natural evil. For further discussion of the problem of natural evil in relation to biological design arguments, see also Joseph CORABI, “Intelligent Design and Theodicy.” *Religious Studies*. Vol. 45. No. 1. 21–35, 2009, and KOJONEN, *The Intelligent Design Debate*, chapter 9.

31 WAHLBERG, *Reshaping Natural Theology*, 173–174.

critiques, Plantinga can appeal to all the common defenses of the compatibility of evolution and creation.³² The second critique (2) is the more difficult one: evolution is argued to make design as an explanation unnecessary, and consequently to undercut any basis for thinking that biology might provide positive reasons for design belief. Evolution and design are conceived as competing explanations for the same data, and once that data is explained by evolution, any basis for perceiving or inferring design is lost.³³

Dawkins argues that the success of evolution provides grounds to be suspicious of all design arguments, not merely biological ones. According to Dawkins, Darwinian evolution functions as a “consciousness-raiser” which shows that teleology can be reduced to material processes, and that we should not trust our intuitions about design in nature. He argues that “a deep understanding of Darwinism teaches us to be wary of the easy assumption that design is the only alternative to chance, and teaches us to seek out graded ramps of slowly increasing complexity. [...] After Darwin, we should feel, deep in our bones, suspicious of the very idea of design.”³⁴ Dawkins argues that since Darwinism shows that reductionistic explanations for teleology are possible, it provides grounds for the reduction of all teleology to non-intentional material causes.³⁵

There are also other ways to argue for evolution as a defeater, such as evolutionary debunking arguments for the reliability of our design detection faculties, but I will not consider these here. In my view, this is not currently a good argument against the *prima facie* reliability of our design perceptions, since all hold the design detection faculty to be generally reliable and essential for human life. The possibility of false positives does not seem to be sufficiently likely to render our perception of design in nature *prima facie* completely unreliable.

32 PLANTINGA, *Where the Conflict Really Lies*, chapters 1 and 2. Ian Barbour (1997) classifies theistic evolutionism broadly into three forms. On the first view (1), God controls events that appear to be random. In this view, the process of evolution is understood to be under God’s control, though his supervision is not included in scientific theories of our origins. In the second view (2), God designed a system of law and chance. God set up the universe at the beginning in a way that makes evolution possible. In the third view (3), God influences the events of evolutionary history without controlling them. In this view, God is understood to give the world much freedom to evolve. God influences evolution through his love, but does not control it.

33 This critique is also at the core of the ID movement’s critique of theistic evolutionism. See KOJONEN, *The Intelligent Design Debate and the Temptation of Scientism*, chapter 10.

34 Richard DAWKINS, *The God Delusion*, London: Bantam Books (2006), 139.

35 This is one point where ID proponent Phillip E. Johnson agrees with Dawkins. See Phillip E. JOHNSON & John Mark REYNOLDS, *Against all Gods: What’s Right (and Wrong) About the New Atheists*. Downer’s Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2010, chapter 4.

Rather, it seems to me that its unreliability must be argued on a case by case basis.³⁶

Rather, I will focus on the main objection, which posits that evolution and design are competing explanations, and that evolution as a well-supported scientific explanation removes any rational basis for positing that biological forms are designed. Plantinga has two main responses here.³⁷ First, he argues that evolutionary theory as it stands can at most give us an improbable possibility of explaining the teleological features of life. As such it can, according to Plantinga, give us at most a “partial undercutting defeater” for our beliefs formed through perceiving life to be designed.³⁸ Here Plantinga comes out clearly on the side of the ID movement, and uses biochemist Michael J. Behe’s argument from irreducible complexity to defend his view. Behe has famously argued that life is dependent on biochemical “irreducibly complex” systems, where each part is necessary for producing the system’s main function. Behe argues that the evolution of such systems through Darwinian evolution is extremely improbable, and that their properties are instead better explained through intelligent design. Behe’s argument has been criticized by many defenders of evolutionary biology, who argue that there are well-established evolutionary mechanisms that can explain the evolution of such systems.³⁹ In any case, Plantinga’s response here is unacceptable for those who see evolution as the probably true explanation for biology. If this were the only possible defense of design discourse, then the project of this article (defending the possibility of design discourse within a theistic evolutionist perspective) would be doomed to fail. I will therefore turn to other possible responses to the evolutionary objection.

Plantinga’s second response is that the theist can appeal to his broader theistic worldview to support the idea that evolution was guided by God, and that the intuition of design in biology is thus correct.⁴⁰ Even if there is no basis for

36 For discussion, see Helen DE CRUZ & Johan DE SMEDT, *A Natural History of Natural Theology*; Wahlberg, *Reshaping Natural Theology*, chapter 6.4, Jeroen DE RIDDER, “Design Discourse and the Cognitive Science of Design.” *Philosophia Reformata*, Vol. 79, No. 1. 37–53; Aku VISALA, *Naturalism, Theism and the Cognitive Study of Religion: Religion Explained?* Ashgate Science and Religion Series. Burlington, VT: Ashgate; and Jan-Olav HENRIKSEN, “A New Basis for Natural Religion? Recent Explanations of Religion and Their Challenges to Contemporary Philosophy of Religion.” *Neue Zeitschrift für systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie*. Vol. 57. No. 4. 2015, pp. 464–482.

37 PLANTINGA, *Where the Conflict Really Lies*, pp. 251–264.

38 PLANTINGA, *Where the Conflict Really Lies*, p. 256.

39 Michael J. BEHE, *Darwin’s Black Box. 10th Anniversary edition*. New York, NY: The Free Press, 2006. For an extended discussion of Behe’s argument and responses to it, see KOJONEN, *The Intelligent Design Debate*, pp. 60–71.

40 PLANTINGA, *Where the Conflict Really Lies*, p. 261.

design discourse from the scientific point of view, the intuitive conclusion that biology is designed might still be reaffirmed from the perspective of faith, because from a theological point of view we might still have reasons to affirm that God has guided evolution invisibly. Here Plantinga comes close to what Barbour has called a “theology of nature”, in which reality is interpreted through a pre-existent theological framework, in contrast to a natural theology, which is, in William Alston’s words, “the enterprise of providing support for religious beliefs by starting from premises that neither are nor presuppose any religious beliefs.”⁴¹

This is all well and good. However, if this is the only response, it seems to me that it indeed entails giving up on some of the core features of Plantinga’s design discourse, which he himself wishes to keep, because he also presents the arguments of the Intelligent Design movement as a response. Namely: Plantinga aims to show that the perception of biological design itself gives some internal support for the believer’s faith in the existence of a Creator, even if it is in itself insufficient for faith. If design discourse is understood as just a theology of nature, then it does not yet make clear how it could provide such extra support for faith, or provide any point of contact or signal of transcendence for those who believe that evolutionary explanations are well-established.

It seems to me that to defend the rationality of this design discourse, it is needed to go beyond the mere compatibility in principle of evolution and the invisible guiding hand of God. Plantinga could also focus on a different premise of the evolutionary objection, namely the idea that evolution and design are competing explanations. Rather, he might argue that evolution, even if accepted, still leaves something about biology to be explained, and that this something is the very thing that triggers our design perceptions in the first place. In that case the success of evolutionary explanations would not eliminate the grounds of the design perception, and Plantinga’s design discourse would be safe from the evolutionary objection. This would also show how design discourse could also be useful within a theistic evolutionist perspective.

Clearly, theistic evolutionists cannot argue that organisms are designed in the same way as human craftsmen make door hinges (recall the Darwin-quote at the beginning of the article: “We can no longer argue that, for instance, the beautiful hinge of a bivalve shell must have been made by an intelligent being, like the hinge of a door by a man.”). Biological design arguments have indeed historically been formulated in competition with natural explanations. Such arguments typically proceed by identifying some property in biology that is then

⁴¹ William ALSTON, *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991, p. 289

argued to be most credibly explained by design, such as teleology. And since evolution is typically understood to explain the appearance of teleology in biology by reference to non-teleological mechanisms, the supposition that design and evolution are competing explanations seems at first plausible.⁴²

However, here it seems to me that the work showing the dependence of the evolutionary process in the “wider teleology” of the cosmos is relevant, as in the case of the objection from bad design.⁴³ When analysing that objection, I concluded that we cannot absolve God of responsibility for biological bad design wholly, because those features of organisms come about through a process that depends on background conditions, which depend on divine action. However, if this is correct, it also seems to imply that evolution does not absolve God of the responsibility for teleology. This is because on this understanding, the mechanisms of evolution studied by evolutionary biology do not provide a complete explanation of teleology. Rather, the power of these evolutionary mechanisms depends on the wider teleology of the cosmos. And the problem of the origin of biological teleology is also pushed back to the laws of nature, rather than being “explained away” completely by evolution.⁴⁴ The extent to which the problem is pushed back to the laws of nature depends on our precise understanding of evolution, how Platonic our understanding of evolution is, and how contingent evolution is understood to be. This means that here philosophy of religion can benefit from dialogue with the latest evolutionary biology. For Conway Morris evolution is somewhat contingent, but has a clear direction; according to Gould the course of evolution is wholly unpredictable.⁴⁵ Here new developments in

⁴² See KOJONEN, *The Intelligent Design Debate*, chapter 8 for an extensive overview of the logic of design arguments.

⁴³ On the concept of a “wider teleology”, see Alister MCGRATH, *Darwinism and the Divine: Evolutionary Thought and Natural Theology*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009. Accounts like these are much indebted to Augustine’s “rationales semioles”. On Augustine’s theology of creation in relation to evolution, see Matthew LEVERING, “Augustine on Creation: An Exercise in the Dialectical Retrieval of the Ancients.” In *Wisdom and the Renewal of Catholic Theology: Essays in Honor of Matthew L. Lamb*. Ed. Thomas P. Harmon and Roger W. Nutt, 49–65. Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2016. See also Eman MCMULLIN, “On the Origin of Terrestrial Life: A Christian Perspective.” In *Exploring the Origin, Extent, and Future of Life: Philosophical, Ethical, and Theological Perspectives*. Ed. Constance M. Bertka, 80–95. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009.

⁴⁴ The concept of “explaining away” in relation to evolutionary explanations has been analysed more extensively by David GLASS, “Can Evidence for Design be Explained Away?” In V. Harrison and J. Chandler (eds.), *Probability in the Philosophy of Religion*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012, pp. 77–102.

⁴⁵ A highly interesting analogy on this point is provided by WAHLBERG (*Reshaping Natural Theology*, 70–71.) Defending the notion that biology might provide perceptual evidence of design

evolutionary biology are also relevant. As Nicole Hoggard Creegan argues, “While teleology strained against the grammar of natural selection alone, it is not at all a foreign or difficult concept in the light of convergence, *evo devo*, and epigenetics.”⁴⁶ If understood in such a way, it seems to me that evolution does not necessarily need to threaten the rationality of Plantinga’s design discourse.⁴⁷ In that case evolution does not yet show that our agency detection device is incorrect or removes the grounds of our perception of design. Rather, we could simply be perceiving the rational potentiality of the cosmos through biological organisms, which are the supreme manifestations of that potential. The Creator’s wisdom could thus be indirectly manifest in biology, even if the Creator has left the specifics to chance and natural processes.

IV Conclusion

In this article, I have analysed Alvin Plantinga’s design discourse as a promising new attempt to make sense of the idea of purposeful design as part of a religious understanding of biological order. I have analysed two main objections against Plantinga: a theological objection based on the problem of natural evil, and a scientific objection based on evolutionary explanations. I have argued that while

even in an evolutionary cosmos, Wahlberg also makes use of the analogy with evolutionary computer algorithms. There exists a computer program that can write four-part fugues. The user of the program just needs to give the program a general theme, and it will then produce a fugue with many properties that cannot be predicted by the programmer or the user. Nevertheless, all of the fugues will have several features in common: they will be structured according to the western tonal system, exemplify a certain artistic style and so forth. So, it seems fair to say that in terms of these essential features, the products of the program will still be expressive of the programmer’s intent, even if the particulars are left to chance. Similarly, creatures might be expressive of the Creator’s intent, even if the particulars are left to chance.

Wahlberg (*Reshaping Natural Theology*, chapter 7) further notes that speaking of God as the “designer” of biology need not imply that God is responsible for each property of biological organisms, just as a human designer of a house need not be responsible for every particular detail of how the construction work turns out. He goes on to note, however, that for some speaking of God as broadly as “creator” of biology rather than the “designer” of biology may better describe the nature of God’s involvement.

46 Nicola Hoggard CREEGAN, *Animal Suffering and the Problem of Evil*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, 121. Creegan is careful to defend this only as a theological and philosophical possibility opened by the new developments, rather than providing grounds for a natural theological design argument.

47 See further also KOJONEN, “Salvaging the Biological Design Argument in Light of Darwinism?” *Theology & Science*. Vol. 14. No. 3. 2016.

Plantinga himself defends his approach through recourse to the Intelligent Design movement's arguments, it can also be utilized within a theistic evolutionistic view, which accepts mainstream evolutionary biology. However, the viability of design discourse within a theistic evolutionist view is more plausible if the wider teleology of the cosmos is very important for the evolution of biological organisms, and evolution can be understood in an almost Platonic way as the creation of forms whose potential is already embedded within their nature at the start. In that case evolution and design do not need to be understood as competing explanations, but as complementary ones. God is not absolved of responsibility for biological "bad design", but neither does he lose glory for the biology's "endless forms most beautiful".⁴⁸

48 The phrase is from the closing remarks of Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*: "There is grandeur in this view of life, with its several powers, having been originally breathed by the Creator into a few forms or into one; and that, whilst this planet has gone cycling on according to the fixed law of gravity, from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being, evolved." (DARWIN, *On the Origin of Species*. Ed. Gillian Beer. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009, p. 360.) The remark "breathed by a Creator" was added by Darwin in the second edition to emphasize the compatibility of evolution and creation.